

JUNE 15 PHOTOGRAPHING THE MILKY WAY AT THE COLONNADES CAPE WOOLAMAI, VICTORIA AUSTRALIA

You've picked an absolute masterclass of a date and location for astrophotography.

Photographing the Milky Way at the Colonnades (the dramatic, organ-pipe basalt columns on Phillip Island) on **June 15** is a perfect alignment of conditions. June is the dead of winter in the Southern Hemisphere, meaning the nights are long, crisp, and dark. Even better, June 15 happens to line up precisely with a **New Moon**, meaning you will have zero lunar light pollution to wash out the stars.

Here is everything you need to know to execute this shoot safely and get stunning frames.

1. Where to Look & Composition

During mid-June in Victoria, the Galactic Core (the brightest, most detailed part of the Milky Way) rises in the east-southeast early in the evening and arches directly overhead by midnight.

Because the Colonnades rock formations face essentially west/south-west out toward the ocean, you have two primary options for framing:

- **Early Evening (6:30 PM – 9:00 PM):** Look East. The core will be lower on the horizon back over the land/cliffs. This is great if you want to shoot looking back along the beach with the columns sweeping up into the frame.
- **Late Night (10:00 PM onwards):** Look Overhead/West. As the night progresses, the core passes directly overhead and the rest of the celestial band stretches across the sky toward the western ocean horizon. This allows you to frame the towering basalt columns in the foreground with the stars bridging across the water.



Colonnades, Cape Woolamai by Gary Parnell

2. Safety and Logistics (Critical)

The Colonnades is a beautiful spot, but it can be unforgiving at night.

- **Check the Tides:** This is a coastal shelf environment. You **must** check the tide times for Phillip Island before you go. Accessing the base of the columns is best done on a low or falling tide. A high tide combined with strong winter swells can trap you against the cliffs or wash over your gear.
- **The Descent:** Access is via the stairs from the Colonnades parking lot. Walking along the beach in the dark requires a reliable headlamp (bring one with a **red light mode** to preserve your night vision and avoid ruining other photographers' exposures).
- **The Cold:** Cape Woolamai gets hit by bitter, sub-antarctic winds in June. Expect temperatures to feel close to freezing. Layer up with thermal gear, windproof jackets, gloves, and beanies.

3. Recommended Camera Settings

If you are shooting on a standard mirrorless or DSLR camera with a wide, fast lens (e.g., to at or), use these baseline settings to start:

- **Format:** RAW (essential for recovering shadow details in the rocks later).
- **Focus:** Manual focus. Use your camera's screen to zoom in on a bright star or a distant light on the horizon, and tweak the focus ring until the star is a perfectly sharp pinprick.
- **Aperture:** Wide open (,) to let in as much light as possible.
- **ISO:** Start at **3200** or **6400**. Modern sensors handle this beautifully, and you need the sensitivity to catch the faint dust lanes of the Milky Way.
- **Shutter Speed:** Use the "500 Rule" to avoid star trailing (divide 500 by your focal length). For a lens on a full-frame sensor, aim for roughly **20 to 25 seconds**. If you notice slight trailing, back it down to **15 seconds**.

Pro Tip: Consider taking two exposures if you aren't tracking the sky. One long, lower-ISO exposure for the dark basalt columns (e.g., 2 minutes at ISO 800) to keep the foreground clean, and one fast exposure for the stars. You can easily blend them in Photoshop later to get a tack-sharp sky and a beautifully detailed foreground.

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